The Limitations of Hypocrisy as a Strategy of Critique in International Politics

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Abstract

Hypocrisy, when addressed at all, is typically considered a functional, even valuable, aspect of international political practice within International Relations theory. It is alternately seen as necessary to the exercise of sovereignty and a rhetorical device used to seek pragmatic political change. Utilising insights from feminist, queer, and postcolonial theory, this article challenges this understanding of hypocrisy. The article demonstrates that hypocrisy is animated and elided by an investment in a particularly liberal vision of politics and international order (and concomitant obfuscation of the racialised, sexual, gendered, and colonial underpinnings of those same assumptions). The notion of hypocrisy relies upon a unitary and stable subject whose moral consistency is to be expected across time and space – a luxury less afforded to those disadvantaged within intersectional international hierarchies. Consequently, though the charge of hypocrisy appears to be about holding power to account, the article finds that it serves less to uphold normative principles than to re-centre the privileged and powerful subject – typically, the sovereign state of liberal international order – and its consistency with *itself*, as the unit and basis of moral concern. The article concludes by outlining the limitations of hypocrisy as a strategy of critique.

Introduction

Both practices of hypocrisy, as well as criticisms of hypocritical practices, are commonplace within international politics. States accuse other states of hypocrisy[1] as a tactic of statecraft;[2] non-governmental organisations accuse states of hypocrisy in an attempt to promote change and hold them to previously-expressed commitments;[3] and corporations are accused of hypocritically leveraging rights commitments to protect market advantages.[4] International actors consistently engage in practices that may be read as hypocritical,[5] such as Global North states' attempts to reach agreements curbing fossil fuel emissions in the Global South without addressing their own historical – and contemporary – disproportionate contributions to the emissions driving climate change.[6] Scholars have also expressed qualms about hypocrisy in academic practice, ranging from feminist concerns around co-optation[7] to resistance to parachute/helicopter research.[8]

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[1] Press Association 2014; BBC 2016.
[2] Hinck 2022.
[3] Fernández 2022; Medecins san Frontieres 2001.
[4] Privacy International 2021.
[5] Mondon 2015.
[6] McVeigh 2022.
[7] Eschle and Maiguashca 2018; de Jong and Kimm 2017.
[8] Nature Geoscience 2022.

With a few key exceptions,[9] however, hypocrisy per se is rarely examined in International Relations.[10] The *meaning* of hypocrisy is interrogated even less often. Typically, rationalist approaches to International Relations regard hypocrisy as a functional practice sufficiently necessary to the conduct of international politics that it is normatively neutral or even positive.[11] Constructivist and liberal International Relations (IR) theory posit charges of hypocrisy (i.e. anti-hypocrisy) as a rhetorical strategy for promoting positive moral change within the international system.[12] Critical approaches to international relations, in contrast, are more sceptical about the potential normativity of hypocrisy. Drawing upon the insights of feminist, queer, and postcolonial critique, this article demonstrates that existing theorisations (or lack thereof) of hypocrisy in International Relations are limited in several ways.

Mainstream IR treatments of hypocrisy are constrained by an implicit assumption that hypocrisy, as a practice or a rhetorical device, works the same for all actors and all circumstances. Formally, practices of hypocrisy and corresponding critiques may arise within any given community or social context. The degree to which it is logical to tolerate hypocritical behaviour, or pursue a rhetorical stance of anti-hypocrisy, depends upon how a given actor is positioned in relation to both power and the status quo of the given community. This logic pertains in the international and in the theorisation of hypocrisy within mainstream IR theory.

Further, the article will demonstrate that mainstream IR's conceptualisation of hypocrisy reflects a specifically liberal political inheritance. As a practical matter, the status quo in which mainstream IR and the practices of international politics its account of hypocrisy is used to parse are embedded is the existing liberal international order. Both functional and normative accounts of hypocrisy in international politics tend to normatively or analytically presume it operates within a political system meaningfully analogous to (an idealised) liberal domestic polity. These accounts likewise assume that normative values are largely shared and more instrumental practices of, or tolerance for, hypocrisy maintains something worthwhile. Critical IR theory's sceptical treatment of hypocrisy, in contrast, reflects the approach's critique of the inconsistencies and exclusions of liberalism itself.[13]

The naturalisation of liberalism within mainstream IR has two implications for the way hypocrisy is presumed to operate within the international system. First, it projects a set of assumptions that presume – not unlike much of the constructivist norms literature –[14] that international stability is itself a normative good and, correspondingly, that the existing order is at least minimally desirable. Second, conventional IR's treatment of hypocrisy as an effective strategy of critique relies on a liberal understanding of the Self as a universalised, intentional, and autonomous political actor, consistent across time and space.

The aim of the article is not to diagnose this account of hypocrisy as good or bad per se. This is a contextual question relating to how those tolerating or critiquing hypocrisy relate to power and the status quo – in this instance, the liberal international order. Exposing instances

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[9] Price 2008, Zarakol and Lawson 2023.
[10] Zarakol and Lawson 2023, 209.
[11] Krasner 1999; Krasner 2001.
[12] Keck and Sikkink 1998.
[13] E.g. Mehta 2018; Todorov 199.
[14] Zarakol 2014; Steele 2007; Barkin 2003.

of hypocrisy can be an important 'weapon of the weak'.[15] Charges of hypocrisy, notably the 'naming and shaming' of human rights violations, may, under certain conditions, produce ameliorative changes in state behaviour.[16] Instead, this article seeks to complement this literature by examining the under-theorised consequences of the investment in liberal, universalist accounts of hypocrisy and its relationship to liberal international order.

First, as argued by Martha Finnemore,[17] it is difficult to levy charges of hypocrisy against another actor without implicitly reifying the principle at hand as valuable. The less-examined corollary of this point is that charges of hypocrisy make sense only to the extent that the actor levying the charge agrees with both the principle at hand and the system within which it is embedded. Anti-hypocrisy as a strategy of political critique works in the tenor of reform, rather than transformation. It is better suited to some political claims/projects (and thus positions of some actors within the existing international order) than others.

Second, though charges of hypocrisy legitimate the principle at hand, they do so by centring the moral consistency of the purported hypocrite as the primary locus of normative concern. The central question in instances of hypocrisy is less the merit of the relevant principle than the actor's consistency with itself, across time and space. This reifies a particular understanding of the actor– in this instance, a universalised, liberal Self constituted via modern/colonial epistemes – and one that is less available/applicable to all political subjects. As a result, though the charge of hypocrisy is meant to hold power to account, those on the sharp end of the gendered, sexualised, racialised and colonial hierarchies of the existing liberal international order are more vulnerable to being constituted as hypocritical (and 'bad' normative actors).[18]

The article proceeds with an overview of existing conceptualisations – functional and normative – of 'hypocrisy' that characterise mainstream International Relations theory. It then demonstrates, drawing upon critical and postcolonial critiques, how these uses of hypocrisy reflect a continuation of the liberal 'domestic analogy' to the international, with important implications for the presumed desirability of existing international order. The article then illustrates the implications of naturalised normative and analytical liberalism within the theorisation of hypocrisy: the normative reification of the political status quo and a re-centring of the universalised, autonomous liberal Self as the point of moral concern. The article concludes with an explication of the conditions under which hypocrisy may – or may not – function as a useful practice, or form of critique, in the international. This question hinges on whether the political project in question is oriented towards reform of the status or revolution.

Hypocrisy in International Relations

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[15] Brusby and Greenhill 2015, 114; Cardenas 2006, 449.
[16] Hafner-Burton 2008; Hendrix and Wong 2013; Krain 2012; Zhou, Kiyani, and Crabtree, 2022.
[17] Finnemore 2009.
[18] Towns 2010; 2012.

Hypocrisy, as observed by Ayşe Zarakol and George Lawson,[19] though frequently mentioned within disciplinary International Relations, remains under-theorised.[20] This section outlines the two broad uses of 'hypocrisy' – functional and normative – that, though they align with existing schools of IR theory, as noted below, crosscut the discipline. I use the functional/normative heuristic distinction to track how hypocrisy 'works' within mainstream IR broadly, as a precursor to demonstrating the two uses' mutual production within an assumption of liberal politics.

In typical usage, hypocrisy is understood as arising from a difference between a proclaimed standard – either for oneself or for others – and what one actually does.[21] As Martha Finnemore argues in her account of legitimacy, practices of hypocrisy does not pertain to just any form of speech, but rather 'involves deeds that are inconsistent with particular kinds of words – proclamations of moral value and virtue'.[22] As a result, saying one thing and doing another – agreeing to a Tuesday deadline and completing the work for a Friday, fortunately for many academics – does not rise to the level of 'hypocrisy'. Such actions are (usually) insufficiently linked to values, beliefs, and normative commitments to trigger the 'moral opprobrium' necessary to hypocrisy.[23] As further argued by Finnemore, hypocrisy pertains to 'character and identity…we despise and condemn hypocrites because they try to deceive us: they pretend they are better than they are'.[24] Hypocrisy is also perceived to be dangerous to social order, as widespread practices of hypocrisy risk 'destroy[ing] the very moral principles' the hypocrites ostensibly uphold.[25]

In International Relations, however, functional accounts of hypocrisy as a practice found within rationalist (i.e. neorealist and institutionalist) theories frame it as normatively neutral, even positive. Steven Krasner famously defines hypocrisy in international politics as the result of a clash between the logic of appropriateness and logic of consequences, wherein state leaders say one thing and, as a result of overriding interests, do another.[26] Sovereignty, for Krasner, is the paradigmatic instance of this form of pragmatic political hypocrisy. The modern state system requires the principle of juridical, territorial sovereignty to function – and yet it is constantly violated in practice.[27] As observed by Michael Lipson, this account of hypocrisy is a realist-rationalist version of sociologist Nils Brunsson's organisational theory extrapolated to the international.[28]

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[19] Zarakol and Lawson 2023, 209.

[20] I borrow the 'mainstream' definition of IR in referring to disciplinary International Relations theory that explicitly constructs itself as such (i.e. (neo)realism, (neo)liberalism, constructivism, normative IR theory, some historical IR). Works that analyse transnational politics but are not framed as International Relations, such as postcolonial thought – which, not coincidentally, treat hypocrisy differently – inform the critique of mainstream IR made here (with their relationship to critical IR theory noted where relevant).

[21] see Runciman 2008, 8; Glaser 2006, 252.

[22] Finnemore 2009, 74.

[23] Lipson 2007, 6.

[24] Finnemore 2009, 74.

[25] Morgenthau 1952, 35, cited in Lipson 2007, 23; Price 2008, 204.

[26] Krasner 2001, 174.

[27] Krasner 1999.

[28] Lipson 2007, 7-8.

According to Brunsson, political organisations frequently pursue values, priorities, and interests, that appear at odds with each other: they engage in hypocrisy.[29] Rather than positing this hypocrisy as a threat to political legitimacy, however, Brunsson sees the organisation of hypocrisy as a key benefit, and function, of institutions, which enable societies to balance diverse (and contending) political concerns without lapsing into conflict.[30] This argument, that 'organized hypocrisy can hold important functional value',[31] even survival value, has traction in IR. 'Organised hypocrisy' has been used to understand peacekeeping and the UN,[32] statebuilding,[33] regional organisations,[34] the World Bank,[35] judicial reform in fragile states,[36] and multilateralism[37] amongst others. In this approach, the 'problem' to be managed is not hypocrisy, but rather failures in expectation-setting and communication that threaten actors' credibility.[38] The continued existence of the Responsibility to Protect as an ostensibly live international commitment despite its failure to be invoked in the face of many instances of mass atrocity violence since its inception is a good example of this practice.[39] Hypocrisy is instrumentally useful and implicitly normatively valuable to the extent that it preserves order and stability.[40]

The second understanding of hypocrisy within IR, primarily associated with constructivism and the norms literature, is explicitly normative. Though this conceptualisation also tends to see critiques of hypocrisy, or anti-hypocrisy, as a rhetorical device and a means of preserving order, as potentially positive, it also betrays a concern that excessive exposures of hypocrisy may be destabilising. Finnemore argues that, to the extent that powerful actors have publicly declared support for particular principles (i.e. norms), charges of hypocrisy can be an important 'weapon of the weak'.[41] The exposure of failures to adhere to these norms undermines states' credibility and legitimacy and generates social pressure to conform.[42] This, for example, is how the International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court are meant to work – producing compliance less through material enforcement than broader processes of social deterrence and 'norming'.[43]

Constructivism argues this dynamic of 'rhetorical entrapment', though not always framed explicitly as hypocrisy, contributes to norm compliance.[44] The exposure of, and presumed aversion to, hypocrisy (typically referred to in terms of 'shame') underlies most accounts of

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[29] Brunsson 1989; Morkenstam 1721.
[30] Brunsson 1989; 2002.
[31] Lipson 2007, 6.
[32] Lipson 2007.
[33] Egnell 2010.
[34] Cusumano and Bures 2022.
[35] Waever 2008.
[36] Lake 2014.
[37] Acharya 2007.
[38] Egnell 2010, 490-1.
[39] See Zahringer and Brosig 2020.
[40] Zarakol and Lawson 2023, 209.
[41] Finnemore 2009, 65.
[42] Finnemore 2009, 61 and 66-7; Towns and Rumelili 2017, 763.
[43] Jo and Simmons 2016; Jones 2012.
[44] Price 2008, 204.

normative construction/diffusion/change,[45] including the boomerang[46] and spiral models.[47] The most prominent example of this mechanism is 'naming and shaming', wherein advocates expose states' failures to adhere to human rights norms as a means of (hopefully) holding them to account and spurring ameliorative change.[48] Hypocrisy is framed as negative in substance (i.e. human rights violations) but anti-hypocrisy as a positive rhetorical resource, as it provides 'discursive openings that can be exploited' to promote change.[49] Much of the literature is aimed at uncovering the empirical conditions under which accusations of hypocrisy are most likely to work,[50] with some scholars advocating for activists to focus advocacy on state hypocrisy rather than the value of human rights per se.[51]

As observed by Lawson and Zarakol, much of this theorising implicitly or explicitly stems from the position of US unipolarity and foreign policy.[52] There is a racialised, civilisational[53] presumption that naming and shaming, as Zarakol has long argued, and concomitant charges of hypocrisy, will be levied at outlying 'bad actors' who need to be brought into compliance with human rights norms.[54] For great powers (i.e. the US), Finnemore suggests the normativity of hypocrisy is more complex, as 'while unrestrained hypocrisy by unipoles undermines the legitimacy of their power, judicious use of hypocrisy can, like good manners, provide crucial strategies for melding ideals and interests'[55].

This position parallels Krasner's tolerance of functional hypocrisy. The difference is that unipole hypocrisy may be framed as an explicit normative good, as it enables some values to be 'sacrificed in the short term for the sake of other moral values'.[56] On this basis, normative theorist Richard Price argues that a hypocritical acceptance of a lesser moral evil should be understood as fundamentally distinct from the sacrifice of moral principles in pursuit of material or 'venal objectives'.[57] Here, one might think of the EU's tolerance of members' illiberal practices – such as Hungary and Poland's democratic backsliding and declining human rights records –[58] in the seeming-service of preserving the liberal Union. Practices of hypocrisy can counter-intuitively bolster not only international stability, but also the legitimacy of the normative order.[59] The 'problem' of hypocrisy, in this account, is less hypocrisy itself than the risk of charges of hypocrisy reaching a level that 'breeds cynicism and antipathy to politics'.[60]

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[45] Towns and Rumelili 2017, 757.
[46] Keck and Sikkink 1999.
[47] Risse and Sikkink 1999.
[48] Keck and Sikkink 1998; Cronin-Furman 2022.
[49] Bower 2015, 363.
[50] Brusby and Greenhill 2015, 114. While evidence on whether naming and shaming works is mixed (Hafner-Burton 2008; Krain 2012; DeMeritt 2015; Squatitro, Lundgren, and Sommerer 2019), the mechanism through which it is theorised to operate – exposing disconnects between normative commitments and actual action – remains hypocrisy.
[51] Cardenas 2006, 449.
[52] Lawson and Zarakol 2023, 209.
[53] Zarakol 2014.
[54] Brusby and Greenhill 2015, 111.
[55] Finnemore 2009, 61, 81.
[56] Price 2008, 205.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Bernhard 2021.
[59] Finnemore 2009, 72; Lantis and Wunderlich 2018, 18.
[60] Finnemore 2009, 81; Price 2008, 204.

Overall, disciplinary IR's treatment of hypocrisy has primarily attended to how practices and rhetorical accusations of hypocrisy (anti-hypocrisy) work empirically (or fail to). The literature calls for both the strategic tolerance, or embrace, of hypocrisy as necessary to preserving international order and the practical utility of anti-hypocrisy critiques. It overlooks the meaning of hypocrisy per se and therefore fails to consider the situated theoretico-ideological assumptions upon which this naturalised conceptualisation of hypocrisy is founded.

Hypocrisy and Liberalism

This section demonstrates the import of liberal accounts of hypocrisy into mainstream IR. Hypocrisy, and aversion to it, is not limited to liberal polities. The term hypocrisy stems from classical Greek theatre; as explicated by political theorist David Runciman, it originally related to the idea of 'playing a part'[61] rather than a moral ill. Later, hypocrisy was associated with false piety: a critique of religious individuals who did not adhere to the tenets of faith they professed.[62] In so far as hypocrisy involves either a failure to act in accordance with principle or the attempt to hold others to a standard one does not adhere to oneself (i.e. 'double standards'),[63] it need not pertain solely to liberal societies. This definition of hypocrisy pertains as much to communist states, anti-colonial independence movements, or religious communities as it does to liberalism.

As the balance of this section will show, however, liberalism has a particular account of hypocrisy, embedded in a series of assumptions about politics and political subjects, that informs IR. I use elements of liberal political theorist Judith Shklar's complex account of hypocrisy – centrally, her analysis of how hypocrisy *operates* – as a jumping off point from which to illustrate the logic of hypocrisy, both broadly and within liberalism. According to Shklar, as political communities within the West became more secular, the meaning of hypocrisy expanded from private conscience to a broader notion of 'sincerity' (in the sense of genuine commitment, combined with some notion of good intentions).[64] Hypocrisy refers to a discrepancy between *publicly-declared* morals/beliefs and private behaviour. It entails a normative intolerance for a separation in the standards of those spheres. In liberal polities the public/private divide constitutes, and is challenged by, hypocrisy.[65]

This duality between the public and private makes liberalism particularly vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy. As Shklar observes, liberal political systems are premised upon compromise, a stance that resists the acontextual moral consistency suggested by the aversion to hypocrisy.[66] This vulnerability is compounded by liberalism's ideological commitment to individual autonomy/equality – and implicit promise of meritocracy – and the consistent contradiction of those principles by quotidian inequality in liberal polities.[67]

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[61] Runciman 2009, 8.
[62] Runciman 2009, 8; Shklar 1984, 48.
[63] Runciman 2009, 8.
[64] Shklar 1984, 62-66.
[65] Ibid, 74.
[66] Ibid, 48.
[67] Lawson and Zarakol 2023, 210, Shklar 1984, 77. This aligns with social psychology experiments that find the salience of the hypocrisy aversion is greater in contexts that value independence than more highly value interdependence (Effron et al 2018).

(Notably, for Shklar, hypocrisy that obscures, or is tantamount to, cruelty cannot be accepted. Hypocrisy that furthers liberal democracy in protecting human diversity (and addressing cruelty) is tolerable).[68] The pragmatic solution is not to insist on perfect public sincerity (which would require acknowledging lived experiences of inequality) but rather, for the sake of a functioning liberal democracy, to 'act as if' all people were formally and morally equal.[69]. Liberalism depends upon a form of hypocrisy that insists upon its universality.

The Liberal Analogy

Key components of a broadly liberal account of hypocrisy's functions and dysfunctions are apparent in International Relations. Though many scholars hold that the play between private misdeeds and public commitments is, in theory, inapplicable to the international,[70] the anti-hypocrisy mechanism of naming and shaming, now inflected by the distinction between domestic and international, follows this logic precisely. As in much of IR theory, the public/private distinction is transposed to the international/domestic distinction,[71] wherein the 'bad' private behaviour aligns with, for instance, domestic human rights violations that contradict the 'public' support of human rights made to the international community.

Likewise, critiques of states as enacting 'double standards' – such as demanding human rights standards abroad perceived to be greater than what is practiced 'at home' – are an affront to the equality and recognition that is meant to characterise relations between political actors within domestic liberal polities and sovereign states abroad.[72] The presumption that the exposure of hypocrisy will have political effects,[73] similarly, mirrors the liberal ideological belief that once new facts are produced and publicly known, shared rationality will lead to a common diagnosis and positive change.[74]

The implicit construction of hypocrisy within constructivism is indebted to how hypocrisy is presumed to work within liberal political theory/polities. It reflects the tendency of constructivism – and the norms literature specifically – to focus on liberal politics, practices, and beliefs.[75] The rationalist approach to IR hypocrisy, however, also demonstrates these liberal underpinnings. Though Brunsson's account of organised hypocrisy, which much of the functional literature draws upon, is explicitly framed as generalisable to a variety of organisations, it was developed with reference to Swedish local government.[76] The organisation of hypocrisy was paradigmatically illustrated with the imperative to balance competing values and priorities within a democracy.[77] As a result, though Krasner and other functional hypocrisy theorists seek to clarify the differences between domestic polities and the international, the *logic* of hypocrisy remains informed by an underlying conceptual, if not substantive, liberalism.

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[68] Shklar 1984, 77; Han and Nantermoz 2022.
[69] Ibid, 77.
[70] Finnemore 2009, 72.
[71] Sylvester 1994, 22; Lu 2006, 119.
[72] Lawson and Zarakol 2023, 205.
[73] see Brusby and Greenhill 2014, 105.
[74] see Sedgwick 1997.
[75] Barkin 2003; Steele 2007; Glasius et al 2020.
[76] Krasner 1999, 5; Brunsson 1989.
[77] Morkenstam 2019, 1721.

Disciplinary IR's account of hypocrisy thus rests on blurred liberal analytic and normative commitments. The theorisation of both the tolerance of hypocrisy in the international and the utility of rhetorical charges of anti-hypocrisy by mainstream IR scholars – functionalists, normative theorists, and the many empiricists evaluating the bounds and efficacy of charges of hypocrisy – reflects an underlying analytic universalisation of specifically liberal political logics. IR's construction of tolerance of hypocrisy as positive relies on an underlying assumption that hypocrisy works in the service of preserving not any form of international order, but a specifically liberal one.

The underlying liberal international order is necessary for the functional and normative logics of hypocrisy to operate as theorised. It is reproduced by these same assumptions. The normative point is not that tolerating hypocrisy or anti-hypocrisy critique are good, but rather that liberalism is. This is what makes public accusations of hypocrisy – against, particularly, the liberal states and principles presumed to make up the international order – ostensibly more dangerous than hypocrisy itself.

Liberal Hypocrisy

Critical international relations theory, in contrast, following its scepticism towards liberalism's ideological commitments to equality, individualism, and autonomy, regards the pragmatic value of hypocrisy with scepticism. This scholarship highlights the strategic and ideological value of what Edward Said and Ranajit Guha frame as liberal hypocrisy.[78] Here, the uneven extension of liberal rights and recognition to all peoples is not a failure, of some 'actually existing liberalism',[79] but rather a reflection of its constitutive inextricability from empire and racialised hierarchy. This is the primary distinction from liberal accounts of hypocrisy: what liberal theorists may read as problems to be addressed by liberalism, postcolonial scholars read as necessary to liberalism.

Postcolonial and decolonial scholars argue that the 'progressive' manifestation of liberalism in the European core, as both ideology and system of governance, depends upon the networked, colonial exploitation of others around the globe.[80] The inside/outside distinction that facilitates the double-standards of moral proclamations internationally, and denial of inequality and violence 'at home', reflects a broader 'wilful amnesia' of the ways in which the (liberal) international order relies upon and reproduces racialised expropriation, genocide, and displacement.[81] As argued by Anthony Anghie and Laura Benton respectively, sovereignty is less a matter of functional hypocrisy amongst equals than an imperial means of excluding racialised peoples and colonial spaces from 'the international' along juridical, liberal lines.[82]

The hypocrisy mainstream IR frames as instrumentally tolerable is made possible by a public/private, domestic/international distinction that is built upon, and yet belies, the legacies of empire and coloniality in ordering the international. This is seen in Beate Jahn's

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[78] Hindess 2009; Guha 1997; Said 1992; Césaire 1972.
[79] Hindess 2008, 349-50.
[80] Lowe 2015.
[81] Krishna 2001.
[82] Benton 2014; Anghie 2007.

analysis of how the seemingly-universal tenets of classical liberal political theory, particularly those derived from the apocryphal 'state of nature', rely upon a racialised notion of difference from non-European Others that facilitated mass violence, dispossession, and the differential extension of rights from the inception of European colonialism through the present.[83] The argument of some critical scholars that international law is inconsistently applied to Palestine (the "Palestine exception") would, here, be read less as a liberal failure than a reflection of its continued entanglement with settler colonialism.[84] Nivi Manchanda, relatedly, argues that the Trump administration should be viewed not as aberrant to liberalism, but rather a manifestation of its entanglement with colonial racial capitalism.[85] Liberalism might be the paradigmatic articulation of organised hypocrisy – to such an the extent that, as empire and racial hierarchy appear to be constitutive of the system, we might question whether this is meaningfully hypocrisy at all.

Disciplinary IR is increasingly alive to these tensions within liberalism. Lawson and Zarakol, notably, are clear that liberalism's universal ideological commitments are consistently belied by inequities and hierarchies in liberal practice.[86] Despite an awareness of a disconnect between liberal aspirations and practice, however, the balance of the IR hypocrisy literature maintains a pragmatic commitment to liberal internationalism. Price argues – contra the critical position on liberalism – that the insistent *exposure* of hypocrisy, unaccompanied by an alternative/better practice,[87] is dangerous to (liberal) international order and thus itself potentially immoral. Lawson and Zarakol state this explicitly, arguing that charging the liberal international order with hypocrisy 'not just help[s] to weaken the LIO, but…also play[s] [a] part in the formation of international orders that are likely to be explicitly hierarchical. Here there may be a cautionary case to be made: be careful what you wish for'.[88] IR broadly argues for the maintenance of international order, despite its flaws, via an implicit agreement to 'act as if' the promises of liberal universalism hold.[89]

IR's pragmatic tolerance of the empirical failings of liberal international order, however, is not paired with an interrogation of how liberal theory and analytics themselves reflect liberalism's constitutive flaw: the racialised, colonial, gendered, and sexualised power at work in universalising a particular account of politics, morality, and subjectivity. The balance of the article plays out two related, deeper political perils of invoking the hypocrisy charge that arise as a function of its unexamined production within a liberal political tradition.

First, the article demonstrates that the existing IR account of hypocrisy implicitly supports the tolerance of hypocritical behaviour (particularly by great powers and/or former colonial states) in so far as it upholds the existing, hierarchical liberal international order. Second, the article demonstrates that the existing IR account of hypocrisy rests upon the universalisation of a particular model of agency – as white, masculinised, cis, heterosexual, and, vitally,

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[83] Jahn 2016.

[84] See Erakat 2020; Hill and Plitnick 2022; Abdo 2023.

[85] Manchanda 2023.

[86] 2023, 210.

[87] Price 2008, 210,217.

[88] Lawson and Zarakol 2023, 215.

[89] From an intra-liberalism perspective, this may be read as a contestation over the meaning of cruelty, and which hypocrisies can be tolerated in the service of maintain the liberal international order.

monolithic – that is less applicable and available to those with less power in the liberal international. Overall, the normativity of hypocrisy – *both* as a practice to be tolerated and/or as an ameliorative strategy of critique – depend upon how a given actor relates to the status quo (substantively, the liberal international order).

Hypocrisy and Reification

The first peril of invoking the hypocrisy charge stems from the fact that the effective political deployment of hypocrisy relies on the validation of the principle that is (not) being followed in the first place. Consider, for instance, a 2022 social media post by an Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson accusing the US of hypocrisy over its stated intention to increase sanctions on Iran following a crackdown on protests in reaction to the police killing of Mahsa Amini: 'It would have been better for Mr Joe Biden to think a little about the human rights record of his own country before making humanitarian gestures, although hypocrisy does not need to be thought through'.[90] The claim is that the US itself does not respect human rights (and thus applies a double-standard) and is instead inflicting harm through sanctions (and thus acting hypocritically). This is a classic rhetorical use of hypocrisy in international politics for geopolitical ends, deployed by one state against another in a political conflict, but in the context of a presumptively shared normative standard (here, human rights). It also helps illuminate a logical flaw within the way hypocrisy is frequently used that is unacknowledged within IR theory (and international political practice).

Charges of hypocrisy make the most sense for those sharing the values of the relevant figure. In the classic domestic political example, conservative politicians and public figures may be shamed as hypocrites following their entanglement in sex scandals.[91] For those sharing an ideological or moral commitment to the violated values, this charge of hypocrisy follows. For those with liberal or progressive political commitments vis-à-vis sexuality, however, accusations of hypocrisy at least implicitly suggest that principles with which they may not agree – in this case, conservative, patriarchal, and/or heteronormative values – are valid and worth upholding.[92] In the above example, the Iranian state official is in the odd position of reifying liberal human rights principles the Iranian state has, in the past, opposed.

This dynamic is also illustrated by the following excerpt from a 1954 letter to *The New York Times*, commenting on the 'Soviet hypocrisy' of the USSR signing the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide:

'There is much tragic irony in the news that the Soviet Union has ratified the United Nations pact outlawing genocide…what else but genocide can we call the dispersion, murder, and imprisonment which have been suffered by innumerable Soviet peoples these past thirty-seven years?'.[93]

Here, the author critiques the USSR for perpetrating mass human rights violations and human suffering – a straightforward practice of naming and shaming. The direct object of critique

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[90] Jordan Times 2022. On the protests, see Khatam 2023.
[91] Gamson and Lowi 2023.
[92] see McDonough 2009, 287.
[93] *New York Times* 1954.

here, however (the object of shame), is not the perpetuation of mass atrocities per se, but rather the USSR signing the Genocide Convention. The charge is hypocrisy, not violence. As a result, the letter is in the odd position of criticising the USSR for doing something the author *agrees* with and their home state has not done. The United States did not ratify the Convention until 1988.[94]

Substantively, from IR's naturalised position of analytical and normative liberalism, these logical failings in the leveraging of hypocrisy are unobjectionable. Iran is responding to and reifying a form of liberal international hegemony; the USSR (and US's) hypocrisy is in the service of upholding human rights and criminalising genocide.[95] The speakers, arguably, have simply made errors in reason in their use of the hypocrisy charge. The analytical point, here, is not that police violence, genocide, or mass human rights violations are in anyway defensible; acceptance of violence is not the opposite of a hypocrisy charge. The aim, instead, is to illuminate what happens when critique, including that of mass harm and suffering, are cast in the idiom of hypocrisy. The examples of Iran and the US-USSR are analytically useful in demonstrating that: a) charges of hypocrisy operate differently depending upon one's positioning within the existing system; and b) that despite their short-term utility, accusations of hypocrisy can also, in reifying the terms of critique, work against the principles (and structural position) of the speaking actor.

Tolerating Hierarchies

Though the above argument is made with respect to authoritarian states, the same dynamics pertain to actors without access to state power – including progressive, radical, and/or potentially transformative actors. For those marginalised within the liberal international, it is impossible to levy charges of hypocrisy without reifying the ideological system that makes those charges sensible.

To take another example, the Canadian state's treatment of Indigenous peoples – from police brutality to the failure to investigate missing and murdered Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people to over-incarceration to the abuse of children within violent residential schools, practices together acknowledged as genocide[96] – has been criticised as hypocritical.[97] Either the racist, colonial violence experienced by generations of Indigenous peoples at the hands of the Canadian state is a hypocritical contradiction to Canada's identity as a liberal, inclusive and multicultural state or said identity is itself hypocritical in light of the state's foundational dependence upon genocidal settler colonial violence.[98] In contrast to the two examples above, Canada epitomizes liberal hypocrisy.

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[94] Anton Weiss-Wendt (2017) argues that the USSR used the negotiation of the Genocide Convention to embarrass the US for its hypocritical historical and contemporary racial violence. The USSR also worked to ensure that political groups were not specified as potential victims of genocide in the Convention. In drafting the Convention, major powers sought to ensure their own practices would not be qualified as genocide – a double standard constituted by internationalisation.

[95] As Finnemore, Price, and many international legal scholars would expect.

[96] Barber 2015; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015.

[97] see Ruffo in Robinson et al 2015, 25-6; Merasty and Carpenter 2022; Cecco 2021; El-Sherif 2020; MacDonald 2021; Samson 2020.

[98] Lackenbauer and Cooper, 2007.

Attempts to hold Canada accountable for violence and discrimination against Indigenous peoples through charges of hypocrisy – as violations of ostensible liberal commitments to equality, inclusivity, etc – also reify that same vision of liberalism as accurate and legitimate.[99] It suggests a meaningfully universalist, open, and inclusive liberalism either: a) exists, and is violated by these violences; b) is possible; or c) is aspirational. Criticisms of liberalism as hypocritical are unable to get at the foundational constitution/reliance of liberalism upon these violent 'hypocrisies'.

The implicit tolerance of hypocrisy within IR theory thus does not account for the differential positioning of various peoples within the international system vis-à-vis the reified presumptions of liberal equality and inclusion. In instances of liberal hypocrisy, the hypocrisy people are asked to tolerate (even esteem) for the sake of liberalism, democracy, social order, etc. is not that of discrete individuals, politicians, or the Canadian state. Instead, it is the ideological system and social structure those actors are located within: a system productive of their own expropriation, marginalisation, and discrimination.[100]

Appraisals of the pragmatic value of liberal hypocrisy (or what the mainstream literature might consider functional hypocrisy), despite its violences and inequalities, presume that individuals and peoples are positioned equally in relation to liberalism's aspirations and pitfalls. This assumption fails to engage with the many conceptual and theoretical critiques of even idealised ideological liberalism – let alone its imperfect practice – as foundationally reliant upon exclusion and marginalisation. Charles Mills, though sanguine about the possibility of revivifying Enlightenment ideals to address racial oppression, demonstrates that the social contract upon which most liberal political theory is premised does not exist between acontextual and ahistorical universal subjects, but relies upon and reflects an underlying agreement amongst white, European men to expropriate, displace, exploit, and marginalise Black and Brown peoples through imperialism, settler colonialism, and chattel slavery.[101] Carole Pateman, likewise, argues that the social contract is dependent upon an underlying sexual contract, wherein men collude to exclude women from the public sphere, preserving patriarchal access to sexual and domestic labour.[102]

Liberalism is predicated upon not only the universalisation of a particular subject – a white, cis, heterosexual, economically productive man – but also his positioning within a particular set of hierarchicalised gendered, sexualised, racialised, colonial power relations. The presumption that all subjects are positioned equivalently in relation to liberalism's failings is a particular standpoint universalised to the entire system. It is a form of racialised, colonial ignorance –[103] facilitated by the articulation of abstracted ideological claims in the grammar of social scientific analysis –[104] that is related to, but exceeds, the ethnocentrism of social constructivism's presumption of a globally shared worldview.[105]

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[99] Fung 2023.
[100] In a colonial context, it is arguably epistemic violence. See Fanon 1961.
[101] Mills 1997.
[102] Pateman 1988.
[103] Sabaratnum 2020.
[104] Krishna 2001.
[105] Zarakol 2014, 312,319.

From the perspective of those constitutively marginalised within liberalism, the call to tolerate liberal hypocrisy is not a call to 'act as if' everyone is equal. Instead, it is a call to 'act as if' liberalism treats oneself equally and to ignore one's own marginalisation and expropriation. The 'problem', here, of charges of liberal hypocrisy is not that they are dangerous to liberal international order. The problem is that they aren't. Critiques of individuals, states, or even liberalism as hypocritical do not (cannot) reflect upon the racialised, colonial, gendered, and sexualised aspects of liberal order itself.

Re-Centring the Centre

The reification of an idealised and decontextualised liberalism brings us to the second peril of using anti-hypocrisy as political critique. The hypocrisy charge suggests that being morally coherent is more important than the substantive normative content of either the principles or contravening actions themselves. Practices of hypocrisy are not framed as a means of interrogating the normativity, viability, social relations, and power dynamics of a particular set of values and political commitments, but rather the moral identity of the hypocritical actor.

Charges of hypocrisy are an attack on integrity and moral character: 'to insinuate that someone is hypocritical is to collapse his self-image'.[106] Actors can be hypocritical in two ways: by condemning others for wrongs one often commits or by failing to align one's own conduct with one's own principles.[107] In each case, the centrality of the actor's beliefs means the ill of hypocrisy hinges on the actor's intentions and sincerity.[108] This is why, as Price points out,[109] the efficacy of a hypocrisy charge relies on the actor critiqued being sufficiently invested in both their own identity and the relevant construction of morality to adjust their actions.[110] Whether or not an actor is hypocritical hinges on whether or not the actor has violated their own *sincere* beliefs.

Consequently, charges of hypocrisy revolve around the character of the potential hypocrite – often, as hypocrisy is regarded a 'weapon of the weak', the more powerful actor – rather than the substantive harms impelled by their actions. As we saw in the above example of the USSR and the Genocide Convention, the USSR and its disingenuousness, rather than the mass violence in which it was engaged, was centred in the conversation. The USSR was not framed as the complicit or culpable agent, but rather as the object of moral concern. There is a risk, in international politics and liberalism-informed IR theory, of conflating hypocrisy and injustice.

This distinction is evident, for instance, in Runciman's analysis of how hypocrisy operated in political contestations leading up to the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783). Runciman observes that in the present, the support of slavery by US founding fathers arguing for

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[106] Shklar 1984, 64.
[107] Cornell and Sepinwall 2020, 156.
[108] Shklar 1984, 80.
[109] Price 2008, 204.
[110] The hinging of naming and shaming – hypocrisy – upon critiques of the Self, rather than contestation over substantive rights and wrongs, helps explain defensive reactions to shaming the literature has found to undermine the efficacy of human rights norms (see Snyder 2020).

individual rights and freedoms, strikes us as the central hypocrisy of the era.[111] At the time, however, slavery was regarded by US politicians not (solely) as a moral harm,[112] but one of many dimensions of the British Empire's *political* hypocrisy.[113] The Crown criticised US settler colonists for practicing slavery though the Crown had not outlawed the slave trade.[114] Slavery was seen by US political actors as 'symptomatic of the ways in which the double standards of empire had made it impossible for the colonists to control their own destiny'.[115]

These charge(s) of hypocrisy do not address the central harm of chattel slavery: the mass enslavement and expropriation of Black people. The contention is not that slavery is wrong, but rather than an expectation of reciprocity amongst white colonial elites and the Crown has been violated. The operation of hypocrisy here reflects the constitutive operation of liberal hypocrisy. Constructing the contestation in terms of the consistency of the UK Crown depoliticised chattel slavery. This facilitated further cooperation by the white settlers amongst whom slavery remained a matter of contention. As the 'lowest common denominator' of political critique amongst those who cannot otherwise agree, charges of hypocrisy turn issues of substantive principle into diagnoses of character.

This normative emphasis upon hypocrisy also risks prioritising a coherence of stance and/or principle over the content and implications of those principles. As Lipson states, 'condemnation of hypocrisy, in the normal sense of the term, assume that the hypocrite is a coherent, unitary actor. The moral stigma attached to hypocrisy flows from this assumption'.[116] This expectation of coherence and consistency is seen in the social relations of norm adherence, wherein the existence of a normative standard hierarchically differentiates amongst 'good' and 'bad' actors.[117] As Towns and Rumelili and Zarakol identify in their challenges to the Eurocentrism of constructivist IR, norm violators are constructed as 'lesser states than those with better performance';[118] they are inferiorised and stigmatised.[119]

The stigmatisation of norm violation means norm adherence is itself constructed as a normative position that requires constant maintenance. Inconsistency itself, Runciman observes, is typically insufficient to generate opprobrium; it is instead the commitment not to be inconsistent (a commitment frequently taken for granted in the liberal constitution of publicly-oriented normativity) that is derided as hypocritical.[120]

Consistency and Marginalisation

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[111] Runciman 2009, 75-6; Jones 2021.
[112] Chattel slavery was a matter of contention within the now-United States prior to the Revolutionary War, with some (predominantly free Black people and Black and white abolitionists) arguing against slavery with others, typically slaveholders, in favour. In another layer of hypocrisy, many slaveholders used the language of slavery to argue for independence, as they framed themselves as slaves of the British Crown. Dorsey 2003; Jones 2021; Shklar 1991.
[113] Runciman 2009, 76-7.
[114] The slave trade was outlawed in the British Empire in 1807; enslaved people in the colonies were not freed until 1838.
[115] Runciman 2009, 76.
[116] Lipson 2007, 9.
[117] Towns 2010; 2012.
[118] Towns and Rumelili 2017, 764.
[119] Zarakol 2014, 314.
[120] Runciman 2009, 9.

This expectation of moral consistency relies upon and reifies a particular notion of the normative liberal political subject, whose constancy across time and space is lauded as the benchmark for morality. Not all people and communities, however, are included within, or have access to, the normative characteristics of the liberal political subject and presumptive normativity of liberal political orders. Interrogating the politics of hypocrisy also requires unpacking the inadvertent consequences of the naturalisation of this form of subjectivity for those positioned differently within liberalism/the liberal international.

Schematically, to be capable of hypocrisy, the relevant political actor must be conceptualised as intentional, rational, and autonomous: able to control their actions (exercise agency) and thus be held responsible for outcomes. The potentially-hypocritical actor is typified by 'inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness, and worth…usually as having begun in or around birth and liable to extinction with death'.[121] He is the universalised subject of liberal modernity,[122] whose integrity is a key determinant of rationality and, through the exercise of reason, morality.

Many, though not all, of the potential limitations of hypocrisy as a strategy of political critique stem from the particularistic characteristics of the normative liberal subject outlined earlier – i.e., the implicit construction of the subject as white, cis, heterosexual, masculine, frequently settler/colonial – and their entanglement with the seemingly-neutral attributes of liberal modern agency outlined above. The 'reason' of the liberal subject, for instance, is constructed in accordance with gendered, masculine tropes of objective, acontextual knowledge and rationality as expressed through instrumental goal-seeking.[123] Autonomy is likewise premised upon a social reality where the masculinised agent is unencumbered by social obligations or material constraints.[124]

Likewise, the unitary subject presumes the existence of a single set of principles or commitments, internally consistent with each other, to which the subject may be held to account. This construction cannot attend to lived experiences of coloniality[125] and the differential positioning of peoples within imperial and racialised hierarchies. Coloniality, postcolonial and decolonial scholars argue, does not imply a mimetically transposed unitary, modern, liberal political subject, Instead, coloniality creates a 'postcolonial subject',[126] constituted through multiple locations, workings of power, and social relations simultaneously. Homni Bhabha's concept of hybridity refuses the application of a unitary Western subject to people existing in relations and spaces of coloniality, arguing they are both 'Western' and 'local'.[127] Within Black US culture, Cornell West similarly argues that 'there is no subject expressing originary anguish…but a fragmented subject, pulling from past and present, innovatively producing a heterogenous product'.[128] Decolonial feminist theorising

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[121] Laing 2010, 41-2 in Rossdale 2015.
[122] Ashley 1989.
[123] Harding 1992; Lloyd 1984.
[124] Beneria 1993; Sylvester 1992.
[125] Biolsi 2004; Jabri 2012.
[126] Jabri 2014, 380-3.
[127] Bhabha 1984; 1996.
[128] West, cited in Bhabha 1994.

likewise recognises a plurality of selves, informed by race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, that are fluid and changeable across time and space, responding to material patterns of colonial oppression. [129]

The expectation of a unitary subject, as identified by Rossdale and Zarakol in their critiques of the ontological security literature,[130] also reflects a preference for epistemological certainty and absolutist moral reasoning. It supposes that we can know hypocrisy and hypocrites when we see them, as the principles at hand are well-defined and contravention is obvious. This is not itself surprising; Western thought is structured and made meaningful via binaries. Most things are represented through an exclusionary logic of either/or.[131] The expectation of consistency with a unitary, unchanging Self upon which hypocrisy relies reflects a broader normative preference for clarity and resolution and an intolerance for uncertainty and ambivalence.

Liberalism's insistence upon the homogenous and stable subject is constituted via hetero- and cis-normative assumptions. It excludes, and exists in opposition to, 'the queer', characterised by Sedgwick as that which will not (or cannot be made) to signify monolithically.[132] Accusations of hypocrisy reproduce a vision of the subject that excludes the plural and the fluid as lived experiences of queer people and as a mode of representation and politics.[133] The moral opprobrium that accompanies hypocrisy also cannot account for instances in which lived disconnects between the fictive 'public' and 'private' are a joyful, generative multiplicity of experience.[134] It is also a matter of survival for queer and trans people whose safety and fidelity to self is jeopardised by externally-imposed expectations of 'coherence'.[135]

Hypocrisy's reliance on an implicit or explicit condemnation of ostensible 'deception', in particular, is cisnormative. It normatively prioritises an absolutist correspondence between 'public' and 'private' identity that reifies a binary, biologically essentialist heteronormative and cissexist gender order. Liberalism also, in its valorisation of 'transparency', reinforces a discriminatory expectation regarding the public's entitlement to know about and police such correspondence. The ideological elevation of the unitary self and value/existence of public 'consistency' reproduces the same transphobic antipathy for 'deception' that places trans people at risk of violence.[136] Monolithic normativity, both per se and in various substantive guises, within liberalism operates as a subtle form of coercive hegemony.[137]

If we take the plurality of subjectivities seriously, however, the normative pull of hypocrisy loses power. A hybrid, fragmented, and/or plural subject implies multiple, superficially

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[129] Lugones 2010; Anzaldúa 1987.
[130] Rossdale 2015; Zarakol 2010, 2017.
[131] Weber 2014.
[132] Sedgwick 1993, 8.
[133] Hypocrisy is often understood in sexualised terms, both in the centrality of sexuality to understandings of 'private' morality and the use of heterosexual marriage to analytically illustrate the moral logic and opprobrium of hypocrisy (see Shklar 1984, 63). Hypocrisy literally needs a straight man.
[134] Ahmed 2006.
[135] Bettcher 2007; Muñoz 1999.
[136] Bettcher 2007.
[137] Thanks to Nivi Manchanda for sharpening this point. See also Berlant 2020.

contradictory understandings of normativity.[138] These arise from the location of the actual people within multiple lived normative systems that include, but are not exhaustively defined by, the modern liberal international.[139] They also arise from the embedding of people in complex social relations of affect, love, obligation and reciprocity – such as the way feminised subjects frequently provide/are expected to provide non-instrumentally rational 'care'[140] – that inform their normative/political priorities and their ability to act 'consistently' across space and time. The hypocrisy charge fails to account for how people's differential experiences of gendered, sexualised, racialised, colonial, and capitalist hierarchies impede their ability (or desire) to be consistent over time.

Limitations of the Hypocrisy Charge

Hypocrisy, then, may not work as expected in international politics. Practices that may, from a liberal understanding of politics and agency, appear hypocritical, may instead be matters of survival and/or expressions of joy, morality, and connection. Inconsistency is a constitutive condition of multifaceted resistance or transformational politics.

The expectation of consistency with a unitary self, however, remains stigmatising.[141] Any actor, of course, is subject to censure for hypocrisy. No individual or collective actually is, or can embody, the normative liberal subject; no subject actually exists within its aspirational social relations.[142] The failure to act consistently with oneself over time, however, is constituted in exclusionary terms that do not attach to all actors equally. Acting 'irrationally' or 'inconsistently' aligns with gendered stereotypes of feminised subjects as mercurial or volatile, racist colonial tropes of dishonesty, deception or calculation, and hetero- and cis-normative constructions of ambivalence and plurality as dangerous.

Pragmatic strategies of calling out hypocrisy in international advocacy therefore risk reinforcing a model of the unitary, moral subject that furthers racialised, colonial, sexualised, and gendered marginalisation. This has two corollaries worth consideration. First, though hypocrisy is valorised as a rhetorical resource of 'the weak', the terms upon which anti-hypocrisy functions also make it an effective weapon *against* the weak. Second, the differential susceptibility to be read as hypocritical has important implications for various actors' ability to make a hypocrisy charge.

Philosophers Nicolas Cornell and Amy Sepinwall observe that successfully making moral claims relies on having (or being viewed to have) the 'moral standing' to do so.[143] Making charges of hypocrisy depends on not being regarded as a hypocrite oneself (giving yet another normative edge to the differential distribution of access to the unitary modern liberal subject). Accusations of hypocrisy as a political strategy are therefore particularly effective

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[138] See Ahmed 2000, 112, in de Jong 2017, 154.

[139] Zarakol 2014; Lugones 2010; Blaney and Tickner 2017.

[140] The avoidance of hypocrisy asks one to heroically overcome/ignore the modern public/private divide and gendered expectations that come with it, something that women and feminised subjects are frequently less able to do/be recognised as doing.

[141] Zarakol 2014, 315-6.

[142] Butler in Rossdale 2015, 5.

[143] Cornell and Sepinwall 2020, 156.

against those who seek transformative political change. Activists seeking radical solutions to climate change, for instance, still use some form of fossil fuels.[144] Indigenous activists seeking Indigenous sovereignty may also make formal, rights-based claims on the state.[145] Anti-capitalist advocates still lobby corporations for environmental and/or corporate social responsibility reforms, even as such policies are repackaged as 'greenwashing' to promote further consumption.[146] Here, ameliorative reforms by the relevant corporation follow from the ostensible co-optation, or hypocrisy, of activists.

Absolutist approaches to self-consistency and adherence to moral principle thus help discredit actors seeking transformative political change as hypocritical/unreliable.[147] Political visions that resist co-optation into liberal frames – such as abolitionism,[148] pacifism,[149] or horizontal Indigenous sovereignty[150] – are dismissed as unviable/impossible partially on the basis that their advocates, because they remain embedded in the existing liberal order, are unable to demonstrate how these projects would 'really' work.[151] Charges of hypocrisy, then, may fail to address the short-term, substantive problem at hand by re-centring the more powerful actor's moral consistency. They may also strengthen the ideological and epistemological legitimacy of the same systems of racism, sexism, colonialism, homophobia and transphobia that much activism – including that involved in explicitly liberal naming and shaming – seeks to confront and dismantle.

The implication of this argument is not that tolerating practices of hypocrisy or making anti-hypocrisy charges are necessarily normatively wrong or functionally useless. They are just limited. Everything is always reifying something; it would be analytically hypocritical to suggest an absolutist solution to the workings of power. As many scholars have argued,[152] rights and recognition are essential to life in the existing liberal international order and state system. The claim here is simpler. Scholars and activists ought to consider whether the social relations, hierarchies, and power dynamics built into the principles they indirectly uphold through the tolerance of hypocrisy and/or invocation of anti-hypocrisy are worthy of valorisation. Does (anti)hypocrisy impede or enhance the realisation of a more just world?

Conclusion

This article has argued that tolerance for hypocrisy follows only in instances where an actor seeks to maintain an existing system. Similarly, the hypocrisy charge as a strategy of critique is only logical if the actor levying the charge agrees with the principle being violated (and thus reified as valuable in the making of the charge). Anti-hypocrisy charges are also unable to get at the exclusionary and hierarchicalising assumptions and dynamics that constitute both the

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[144] Worland 2022; Murray and Watson 2022.
[145] See Razack 2016 (and special issue)'s use of both human rights discourses and Indigenous critiques of settler colonialism to confront the Canadian state's neglect of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two Spirt people.
[146] E.g. Bloomfield and Manchanda 2024.
[147] Gunster et al 2018.
[148] E.g. Cady 2023.
[149] E.g. Davis et al 2022.
[150] E.g. Coulthard 2014.
[151] Ryan 2023; Morgan 2021.
[152] E.g. Brown 2002, 239; Madhok 2022.

contemporary liberal international order and implicitly liberal theorisations of hypocrisy. Charges of hypocrisy tend to depoliticise the principle in question in favour of debating the hypocritical actor's moral integrity. The shaming associated with the hypocrisy charge leverages the actor's concern not so much to 'bring about good or act rightly', but rather to their desire to 'avoid personal moral failure'.[153] The mechanism of anti-hypocrisy as a strategy for political change is self-centrism.

Charges of hypocrisy are thus an effective attack on status – hence their potential utility as a short-term, pragmatic form of critique – but are less effective in terms of broader normative change and contestation. The hypocrisy charge reifies a particular model of agency, subjectivity, and morality that reflects longstanding gendered, sexualised, racialised and colonial material and epistemic hierarchies. The implicit universalisation of a masculinist, white, cis, heterosexual, and European notion of agency/morality also makes the hypocrisy charge particularly effective against, and less strategically available to, those excluded or marginalised within liberal modernity.

The primary implication of this analysis is that anti-hypocrisy charges are useful to the extent that the actor making the charge a) agrees with the principle at hand and b) is invested in the existing liberal international order. Though 'naming and shaming' is frequently considered a liberal, pragmatic strategy of the weak, it is more available to those with power. Despite concerns to the contrary, charges of hypocrisy cannot get at, or transform, either liberal hypocrisy or the liberal international order. Charges of hypocrisy work in the register of reform, not revolution. Tolerance of hypocrisy, then, should also be analytically and politically qualified by an assessment of the ends to which that tolerance is directed.

The final implication of this argument is that undue focus on hypocrisy obscures the relationality of the principles, justice claims, and harms that give rise to hypocrisy charges. An analytic and politics that relies on accusations of hypocrisy reflects a position of hierarchically-empowered 'innocence', in the sense that it 'den[ies] complicity in the oppression of others'.[154] This logic suggests that absent hypocrisy or overt and intentional harm, the actor is unimplicated in the fortunes of others, rendering their moral position secure. Morality is constructed as a function of decontextualised individual decisions/actions, rather than a function of pre-existing structures and patterns of hierarchy and inequality. Hypocrisy, in implicitly emphasizing the individual actor's relationship to their own principles over time – to themselves – conflates accountability with shaming.

Critiques of hypocrisy are therefore fundamentally unable to get at a notion of ethics or justice based on mutual obligation and solidarity. The inability of charges of hypocrisy to meaningfully challenge or transform liberalism also means they are unable to direct normative questions towards 'the current and historical connections between people, which are shaped by injustices that structurally disadvantage some and advantage others'.[155] To avoid prioritising a procedural, liberal notion of perfect ethical correspondence between self-image and action over addressing actual harms, scholars, practitioners, and activists must balance charges of hypocrisy with contesting complicity in injustice.

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[153] Cornell and Sepinwall 2020, 155.
[154] Razack 1998 paraphrased in de Jong 2020, 2.
[155] de Jong 2020, 59.

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